September 1998, Volume 5, Number 9

Israel's Foreign Workers

Israel's internal security agency, Shin Beth, labeled foreign workers "a time bomb" that threatens the country's security. There are 190,000 foreign workers in Israel, including 100,000 illegal workers and another 80,000 legal and illegal Palestinians. One-third of the legal foreign workers are believed to remain in Israel illegally following the expiration of their work permits.

Romanian migrants working near the new city of Modi'in brushed past security guards to complain to visiting Romanian Prime Minister Radu Vasile about poor working and living conditions and unpaid wages. About 30,000 Romanians work in Israel, most in construction. Israeli builders say that Romanian construction workers can earn $800 a month in Israel, compared to $80 in Romania.

A decision to send 250 Ethiopian Jews to Israeli settlements in the West Bank in April continues to draw fire from critics who say the government is using the newcomers as pawns in its land battle with the Palestinians. The Israeli government counters that the settlements were the only communities willing to take the new arrivals, an indication that there may be limits to Israel's policy of welcoming all Jewish immigrants.

Orthodox Jews are in charge of the Interior Ministry, which regulates immigration and citizenship, and there have been complaints that the Interior Ministry is making it difficult for non-Orthodox to immigrate. Some fear that large numbers of non-Jews may try to obtain easy conversions abroad and immigrate.

The Israeli Immigrant Liaison Bureau (Nativ) says that about half of the immigrants arriving from the CIS between January and June, 1998 were not Jewish; about 800,000 immigrants have arrived from the ex-USSR since 1989. The Knesset Immigration and Absorption Committee discussed the case of a family that was asked to undergo DNA testing to prove that they were eligible for immigration under the Law of Return.

Religious representatives said DNA tests are legitimate to prove family ties; secular representatives called the tests invasive.

About 10 percent of Israel's six million residents are neither Jewish nor Arab.

Liatt Collins, "Liaison chief: Half of CIS immigrants aren't Jewish," Jerusalem Post, July 14, 1998. "Ethiopians in West Bank Called Pawns in Tussle Over Land," Los Angeles Times, July 9, 1998. Lee Hockstader, "Israel Balks at Admitting Family of Black U.S. Jew," Washington Post, July 6, 1998.